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# Journalism is changing – and what about journalism ethics?

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## Abstract

Major changes have been challenging journalism in the last two decades, in the context of the ‘digital age’. The technological possibilities developed in the ‘information society’, together with the social and cultural trend for more participation, opened this field to new actors, which caused professional journalists to lose their traditional monopoly of searching, gathering, editing and diffusing news in the public sphere. At the same time, these new possibilities of communicating are increasingly forcing the old actors to play new roles in the media. The digital techniques and the Internet gave birth to a big diversity of new media and of new forms of dealing with journalism and public information. ‘Citizen journalism’, ‘participatory journalism’, ‘user-generated content’, ‘crowdsourcing’, ‘weblogs’, ‘Twitter’, ‘Facebook’, etc., are words and expressions rather common these days, all of them somehow calling the attention to the fact *that journalism-as-a-professional-activity* seems to coexist more and more with various forms of *journalism-as-a-civic-activity*, performed by very different people, under very different conditions and with very different levels of involvement and expertise. As a consequence, questions are being raised about the ethical implications of this new scenario, both in what regards the activity of professional journalists in new (online) media and the active commitment of ‘laypersons’ in the process of gathering, editing and diffusing information.

In this paper we will try to analyze and to discuss these questions, with reference, among others, to Eliot Freidson (2004) and his distinction between ‘practice ethics’ and ‘institutional ethics’. Furthermore, we’ll try to discuss what really makes journalism distinctive from other practices that nowadays coexist with it in the public sphere, strongly increasing the possibilities of communication between people but not necessarily following the purposes of public interest and of civic democratic participation. In this context, the concept of journalism seems to ask for a clearer definition, and so do the roles to be played by journalists in the more complex (but also more stimulating) media environment we are dealing with in contemporary societies.

## Keywords

Journalism, journalism ethics, new media, participation

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*“Upheavals in journalism have bequeathed to journalists a dizzying whirlpool of ethical issues that become the topics of talk shows, academic papers, and conference panels. The focus of these discussions tends to be on how to responsibly incorporate new media, including social media, into responsible daily journalism.”*

*Stephen Ward, 2012*

## 1. The professionalization of journalism

Journalism has changed – and is changing – deeply in the last two decades, to a great extent because of the new possibilities of publication, diffusion and interaction brought by the digital technologies and the internet. The clear definition of who is and who isn't a journalist, or of what really characterizes the activity, is also a motive for debate.

The journalists' professionalization process has been difficult, ambiguous and often contradictory in its own terms. It is a relatively recent process – it occurred basically in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and it is still somehow fragile and incomplete, not to mention the argument, raised by some voices, that journalism still shouldn't be regarded as a true 'profession'<sup>1</sup>, but rather as a 'craft' or as a 'semi-profession' (Fidalgo, 2008; Ruellan, 1997).

The fact is that longstanding efforts have been made by the journalists' professional group to try to have their craft socially acknowledged and legitimized as a true profession (following more or less the ideal-typical model of the 'established professions'). In so doing, they couldn't avoid the emergence of some problematic contradictions among them, particularly in the *cognitive* and *evaluative* dimensions – which might help to explain why they often tried to stress the *normative* dimension of their specific work over all the others<sup>2</sup>. After all, journalists always were, and still are, somehow 'ambivalent about the professional project' (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003: 547).

Three main contradictions could be pointed out in this process:

(1) The first one opposes the journalist regarded as an *artist* to the journalist regarded as a skilled *worker*. This perspective isn't without consequences: for an artist, the important thing is

<sup>1</sup> In an important book written by Spanish sociologists Ortega & Humanes (2000), under the title “Something more than journalists” [*Algo más que periodistas*], it is argued that it is a mistake ‘to think about journalism as merely another profession’. Recalling the importance (and power) of journalists in the social construction and interpretation of the reality surrounding us, the authors suggest they play much of the role usually played by intellectuals in the public sphere and, therefore, it is important to try to understand ‘the meaning of an activity that, being undoubtedly a profession, is much more than just a profession’ (Ortega & Humanes, 2000: 9).

<sup>2</sup> We refer here to the different characteristics commonly associated to a claim to professionalism, and synthesized by several authors (e.g. Larson, 1977; Singer, 2003) into these three dimensions: *evaluative* (autonomy and social prestige), *cognitive* (specific knowledge, know-how and skills) and *normative* (public service orientation, altruism, ethics and self-regulation).

his/her talent, his/her ‘call’ to the activity, his/her creative freedom, rather than any specific education or school degree. So, why should we have journalism courses or journalism schools? As someone wrote with irony in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when these questions were coming to public debate, the idea of launching a journalism school would be ‘more or less as if you wanted to create a poetry school...’ (*apud* Delporte, 1999: 176). On the other hand, no activity could be praised and socially recognized as a real, valuable profession if there were no specific education (and usually of a tertiary level) to qualify people for it. That’s why journalism courses slowly began to develop and eventually came to the university (as late as 1979, in what concerns Portugal), trying to raise journalism both to the status of a *profession* and of a scholarly *discipline*, that is to say, of a specific and autonomous field of knowledge, of study and of research.

(2) A second contradiction arises from the way journalism is actually performed: journalists are usually *workers in a media industry*, receiving orders from who owns the company and pays for their salary. The ideal-typical model of a professional *working autonomously*, serving his/her clients in the best (and free) possible way and being accountable to them, is hardly recognizable in the context of a press industry, where routines must be followed, an hierarchical chain must be respected and the individual performance is often submitted to internal rules. This working context seems to be more typical of manual or technical occupations rather than of the intellectual labour commonly associated to the professions. Furthermore, being these media companies in most cases market-driven *private companies*, they are interested in getting as much profit as they can, therefore putting at risk the alleged commitment of professional journalists with the *public service* they offer to society – that is to say, the service of true, comprehensive, accurate, independent information about the world surrounding us.

(3) A third contradiction could be summarized as the choice to stress the pole of *individual freedom* in journalism or, alternatively, to put the emphasis on its *social responsibility*. This question has been extensively studied and discussed, in the context of the research on normative theories of the press, especially after the report of the Hutchins Commission in the USA, in 1947 (“*A free and responsible press*”) and the publication of the classic ‘*Four Theories of the Press*’ (originally in 1956), by Siebert, Peterson & Schramm (1963), where the more ‘libertarian’ or ‘authoritarian’ approaches were matched with the ‘socially responsible’ model for the press<sup>3</sup>. According to the preference of journalists towards one or the other of the poles, a

<sup>3</sup> The more recent book “*Normative Theories of the Press – Journalism in Democratic Societies*”, by Christians, C., Glaser, T., McQuail, D., Nordenstreng, N. & White, R. (2009, Chicago: University of Illinois Press), intends somehow to ‘update’ the contributions of *Four Theories of the Press*, according to the relevant changes in the media landscape since the 1950’s.

particular understanding of their work and role emerges, with consequences for example in what concerns the acceptance of some collective accountability mechanisms regarding ethical issues or, inversely, the insistence on the sole voice of the individual consciousness of the professional as the judge for what is right or wrong.

Although traditionally more inclined to an individualistic approach of the profession, journalists soon realized that their intents towards professionalization asked for some collective responsibility. If they were to be granted some privileges or at least a particular statute in order to control the borders of their territory, they should offer the counterpart of a sort of moralization and self-regulation effort inside those same borders, in order to legitimize their condition – and their power. We shouldn't forget that legitimacy is 'closely allied to the concepts of trust and confidence' (Svensson, 2006: 580), and the need to be trusted was always a very sensitive issue for journalists. Actually, when the press industrialized and developed in a massive way, it was clear very soon that it had an enormous power of influence in society. Besides that, it was also evident that it could be used in the most negative ways, as a vehicle for propaganda, as a means for large-scale manipulation, as an intruder into private lives, as a profitable market instrument to serve vested interests, etc. The need for the press to be free, but *also* to be responsible and accountable, was more and more claimed in those early decades of the journalism professionalization process. The efforts to *professionalize* the journalists ran in parallel with the intent to *moralize* their activity.

In spite of these tensions, the journalists followed the strong appeal to professionalism as soon as their activity became somehow autonomous, as well as socially valued, politically powerful and economically attractive. But, since journalism is 'a social reality which has been developed historically' and 'is also an area for multiple interactions which are necessarily complex' (Ringoot & Ruellan, 2007: 67), its professionalization process was often ambiguous. And the recent changes associated to the 'digital age' are bringing new important challenges to the ways journalism has been practiced.

## 2. New challenges to an old problem

The professionalization process here quickly evoked occurred in a very narrow media landscape, reduced to the written press. As time went by, the problem of who is and who isn't a 'true' journalist turned to be more and more complicated, first with the entrance of new competitors into the media field (radio and television), and then with the overwhelming dissemination of computers, online platforms, Internet, mobile phones, digital technologies, all of which multiplied the possibilities for public communication and for self-edition. If, in the first

stage, there have been only some changes in degree, in the second stage the changes were much deeper: in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, journalism jumped across the borders of the classical industrial media outlets and spread around a lot of new platforms (either industrial or domestic, either collective or individual, either permanent or casual) made possible by the new digital technologies:

Nowadays, when we ask whether someone is a journalist, we may need to refine the question. We should ask: Is this the kind of journalist who presents analysis, commentary, or political rants? Or, is this the kind of journalist who offers the fruits of reporting? Or some of both? The issue is not the job *title* but the *activity* (Daly, 2005, emphasis added).

If it was not very easy to define journalism and journalists at the very beginning of the activity, now it turns to be much more difficult: it's no longer about changes in degree, it's probably about changes in the journalistic traditional paradigm itself. To recall the words of Jane Singer, we now live in a media environment where 'virtually any bit of information, misinformation or disinformation is just a google search away for the online user' (Singer, 2006: 3) and where 'while all journalists still publish information, not all publishers of information are journalists' (*ibidem*). And she goes on, anticipating a first conclusion to her thoughts:

[T]he current media environment – one in which anyone can publish anything, instantly and to a potentially global audience – demands a rethinking of who might be considered a journalist and what expectations of such a person might be reasonable. Journalists no longer have special access to the mechanisms of widespread production or distribution of information. Nor do they have special access to information itself or to the sources of that information. These and other practical notions of what defined a journalist in the past no longer apply. Instead, the contemporary media environment demonstrates the need to emphasize normative constructs for journalists seeking to delineate themselves from other online information providers (Singer, 2006: 8)

In the contemporary media landscape, big changes occurred both inside the journalistic profession and, more broadly, around the journalistic field. In practical terms, journalists lost the monopoly of gathering, handling and disseminating news information about the actuality in the public space. Nowadays, anyone can, at almost no cost and with no particular technical skills, launch a website or a weblog that instantaneously connects you to the whole world, allowing all sorts of messages – including news, as well as commentaries, opinions, critics, etc. – to be sent and received on a large scale. And many of the people using now these new devices and possibilities claim to be doing some sort of journalism, although not on a regular, professional basis ('participatory journalism' and 'citizen journalism' are common expressions to refer to this activity, as well as to the contributions brought by lay people, through laptop computers or through mobile phones, to traditional media outlets – the so-called 'user-generated content' or

‘crowdsourcing’<sup>4</sup>). And if, in some cases, these new trends are not welcomed by the professional group, who insists that journalism should be performed only by credentialed and trained journalists, in other cases (as it happened already with BBC, in the UK, or with the Society of Professional Journalists – and its recent creation of a ‘Citizen Journalism Academy’<sup>5</sup> – in the USA) the professional organizations themselves offered training to average citizens, making them more acquainted with the standards of the profession, and so allowing them to better ‘do journalism’, when the situation occurs.

Furthermore, the development in technologies and telecommunications made it very easy for any institution to directly contact the public without the traditional mediation of journalists. More and more institutions and organizations of the most various areas (in politics, in business, in sports, in culture...) use their own sites, channels and staff to diffuse any sort of information they want to, instead of trying to submit it to a newspaper, a radio station or a television channel, as it was the rule in the recent past. And one of the classical roles of journalists (to uncover and to bring the ‘message’ from the primary sources of information to the public) loosens its importance, up to a point where more and more voices suggest journalism itself is quickly coming to an end. Those who argue that this is an overreacting perspective agree, anyway, that the journalists’ traditional roles are changing, and they will become ‘less the manufacturers of news than the moderators of conversations that get to the news’ (Jeff Jarvis, *apud* Beckett & Mansell, 2008: 97), since ‘networked journalism’ is increasingly taking over former top-down information processes. The traditional role of journalists as gatekeepers of the news that should or shouldn’t go public doesn’t make much sense either, in an information landscape where, so to say, there are almost no gates to keep; instead of that, their job is probably more and more, as Jane Singer suggests, about ‘vetting items for their veracity’ and ‘placing them within the broader context that is easily lost under the daily tidal wave of new «information»’ (Singer, 2006: 12). Not gatekeepers, but ‘sense-makers’; not agenda-setters, but ‘interpreters of what is both credible and valuable’ (*ibidem*), as Singer synthesizes:

The journalist no longer has much if any control over what citizens will see, read or hear, nor what items they will decide are important to think about. In such an open, frenetic and overcrowded media environment, the conceptualization of what a journalist does must turn from an emphasis on process – selecting and disseminating information, framing particular items in particular ways – to an emphasis on ethics (Singer, 2006: 12).

<sup>4</sup> Crowdsourcing is ‘the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call’ (Howe, 2008). When applied to journalism, it means ‘soliciting reporting, writing, editing, photographs – or all of the above – from amateur users, rather than traditionally trained journalists’ (Metzger, 2007: 2).

<sup>5</sup> See <[www.spj.org/cja.asp](http://www.spj.org/cja.asp)>.

These are some of the important changes that can be traced inside the journalists' professional group. Their relationship with the public is a major chapter of these changes, since the traditional stereotype of journalists 'delivering' information to an allegedly passive audience, in a kind of linear, one-way process, is no longer accepted – or acceptable. Either because of the new possibilities of online communication that make interactivity with the audiences easier than ever in the past, or specially because of the new demands by the audience-as-citizens (rather than audience-as-consumers) to be also an active part in the information process, journalism is increasingly asked to work in a networked environment, where new opportunities 'to facilitate public debate' arise (Beckett & Mansell, 2008: 102).

But these changes go beyond the professional group itself, since the new possibilities offered by the digital context caused the traditional boundaries of journalism to be crossed, and, as we said before, more and more people began to involve themselves in an activity which many of them claim to be journalism as well, and as legitimate as its traditional professional form. This claim can be partly associated to the old debate about the bare nature of journalism (a profession?, a craft?, a trade?, just a civic activity?), and about the bare definition of who is / who may be a journalist. Some theoretical controversies about this were present during the journalists' professionalization process, but they faced new strong arguments in recent years.

### 3. Freedom of speech vs. right to information

The simple fact that professional journalists may need to have some sort of license, or school degree, or credential, in order to work as journalists (as it happens in some countries) raises controversies. Those who criticize any kind of license or register for journalists ground their opposition in one key argument: it runs against *freedom of speech*. And freedom of speech, the argument adds, is a fundamental and universal right that cannot be menaced or disrespected in any circumstance. Since journalism is regarded as a direct emanation and the most widespread public expression of this freedom of speech, it can't be subject to any previous authorization, requirement or licensing. The classic example of this opinion points to the example of the *First Amendment* to the Constitution of the USA<sup>6</sup>, which forbids the American Congress to make any law that could affect freedom of speech and freedom of the press. According to this same argument, everybody may be a journalist – and everybody may exercise journalism wherever he/she wants, because it's all about freedom of speech and nothing else. A journalist is regarded

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<sup>6</sup> "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances" (*Bill of Rights – First Amendment*).

as a citizen, equal to any other citizen, and submitted to the general laws of the country, like any other citizen in any other activity<sup>7</sup>. Otherwise, if only a selected number of persons could accede to journalism, that would mean the universal right of freedom of speech would be ‘captured’ by a minority of citizens.

This libertarian perspective has been discussed for a long time. Giroux (1991: 129/130) confirms that journalists ‘tend generally to subordinate their social function to their freedom of speech’, and inscribes this tendency in what he calls the ‘founding myth’ of journalism. Accepting the rationale underlying this myth, the simple idea of making journalism a profession wouldn’t make much sense, because professions usually are associated to a set of attributes (specific knowledge and know-how, school degree, professional code of ethics, restrictions in access) that put them somehow apart from the common citizen. For instance, what’s the point of talking about *journalism* ethics, if journalism is not a specific occupation, with its particular standards, rights and duties, but only the way of any citizen to exercise his/her freedom of speech through freedom of the press?

Challenging this ‘founding myth’ of journalism, strictly based on the universal right to freedom of speech, Giroux (1990: 131) argues that ‘the paradigm which founds the practice of journalism is the right of the public to information’, another fundamental and universal right. Following this alternative point of view, the *social responsibility of the press* – and of journalism – must be brought into consideration too, since those who work to fulfil the fundamental and universal right to information in our society are supposed to do it in an adequate and competent way, for the public interest sake. And this means that they should be well prepared to do the job, that they should be granted some protection in order to work without restrictions, that they should have some specific rights and duties because of that; in return, they should assume a public commitment to follow some professional standards and to obey to specific ethical values and norms, accepting to be accountable for them. This is, after all, the rationale underlying the idea of giving the journalists a special statute (actually, a *professional* statute), presupposing their *right to freedom of speech* as a cornerstone of their activity – although not understood only in individual terms – but adding to it their commitment with the *right of the public to information*.

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<sup>7</sup> In spite of this, even in countries (like the USA) where journalists are not licensed, some practical mechanisms distinguish professional journalists from those working on less formal contexts. As Powell (1998) argues, the granting of press credentials by public authorities to have access to an event, in order to cover it, is a form of licensing journalists, and of deciding who is (who gets the credential) and who is not (who doesn’t). And he concludes: “So who is a journalist? Whoever the government says is a journalist” (*ibidem*). Actually, as Glaser (2008) recalls, bloggers, for instance, still have trouble getting press credentials for events, ‘though established blogs are gaining more credibility with readers’ and, in many cases, they unquestionably ‘do journalism’.



Information, let's insist, that is an essential 'public good' for citizens to be able to take their decisions and to actively participate in the public life.

This special statute has been, in various countries, translated into some kind of mandatory license, credential, chart or card. All of them mean some sort of restriction of access to the job (now understood in professional terms), and, at the same time, they grant the journalists some special rights or privileges (right of access, right to professional secrecy regarding the protection of confidential sources, right to a 'conscience clause' in order to protect their individual freedom) which give them a particular status. Some special duties are also imposed to them (both in legal and in ethical terms), as a sort of counterpart for their privileged position and as an alleged guarantee that they will responsibly and accountably pursue their task of public service.

These are, in general terms, the grounds for the existence of a journalists' professional group – that is to say, an organized group of persons sharing a set of common standards, norms and values, as well as a specific statute and a legal credential, working in journalism on a full-time, exclusive, paid basis, in the context of established media industries.

But in recent years, as we said above, these strict boundaries have been crossed in multiple senses, and more and more persons have been involving themselves in some form of journalism – now understood not as a *professional work* but as a *civic activity*, accomplished on an amateur (even regular) and independent basis, particularly through mechanisms of self-edition made possible by the digital technologies and the Internet. This raises questions about the bare definition of journalism, with some voices arguing that it can't be regarded nowadays as it was in the past, when it was shaped very much according to the self-interests of the restricted community of professional journalists. Critics of a 'single modelling' for journalism, Ringoot & Ruellan (2007: 73/74), for example, argue: 'Journalism is what the actors of the time say, and by actors we mean not just those we designate as professionals, but also those whose discourse transforms perceptions'. Insisting that there are many more actors, besides the professional journalists, who are today involved in producing and publicly disseminating information, these authors add, in a more conclusive way:

The constitutive lack of identity which characterizes the group of journalists and the dispersal which characterizes journalistic production enable us to take on a complex identity which is constantly being rebuilt. The tensions between discursive order and disorder are neither accidental nor occurring only from time to time. They appear to us more as an identity component of journalism (Ringoot & Ruellan, 2007: 74)

A similar approach is developed in another work, where Ringoot & Utard (2005) insist on the need to broaden the traditional definition of journalism, refusing to identify it exclusively

with an alleged ‘essence’ associated to its professional model. Instead, they call the attention to different discursive practices, increasingly present in contemporary societies, which are also engaged in producing and disseminating information. And they add:

The absorption of these different practices by the legitimate sphere risks putting them in comparison with a unique model - the one that was built by the journalism professionalization. However, our conviction is that journalism is a social practice of discursive production before being a profession. In order to study it, we define it on a minimal basis as a socio-discursive practice which brings three stances into interaction: sources, practitioners and publics. (...) This conceptualization allows us to consider as discursive formations some practices that an exclusively normative perspective would dismiss as non-journalistic (Ringoot & Utard, 2005: 18-19)

These perspectives don’t necessarily reject or devalue journalism in its professional, institutionalized form, but they suggest that other practices can deserve some attention in this process of permanent ‘invention’ of the activity.

#### 4. Journalists as professionals and / or as citizens

Who is, then, a journalist? – we might ask. Even among those who claim to actually perform some form of journalism, although on a non-professional basis<sup>8</sup>, there seem to be two different understandings of these new challenges.

On the one hand, there are those who suggest that journalism may be performed in different ways and at different levels, both professional and non-professional, but with a different set of rights and duties; in these cases, those involved in the activity on a part-time, complementary basis, claim to have some specific place (and legitimacy) to do what they do as ‘amateurs’, but they admit that a professionalized form of doing the job brings particular demands regarding education, skills, know-how, knowledge and public responsibility.

On the other hand, there are those who, recalling the ‘founding myth’ of the freedom of speech as the sole and universal ground for the legitimization of journalism, clearly refuse any way of treating journalism as a profession (or even a craft), in the sense that there should be no rules to accede to it, or any kind of license or credential to perform it; in these cases, journalism is understood as a civic activity, open to everyone in a democratic society, and with no particular rights or duties other than those of the general laws of the country. And if there are any specific rules to protect and defend the journalistic work (for example, access to public information or the right to keep confidential sources of information secret), then they must be applied to everyone claiming to do journalism, whether in a traditional media outlet (a newspaper, a radio or TV

<sup>8</sup> It should be reminded that there are also an increasing number of persons (e.g. bloggers) who actually practice some form of journalism as an exclusive, full-time activity, sometimes individually and sometimes collectively, although not linked to any traditional media company – and, therefore, not recognized as professional journalists in *legal* terms. But this doesn’t mean that they are not recognized in *social* terms.

station) or on an on-line news site, a weblog, etc. This would be about citizenship, not about professional work.

We stand for the first understanding of this issue. Trying to deal with the complex media landscape of contemporary societies in a more positive way, we suggest it is useful to distinguish between different levels of journalistic practice (more complementary than mutually excluding), instead of just dismissing any form of information work that doesn't fit the traditional model. Then, in a second step, we can try to outline their particularities and relative positions as far as the journalists' professional group is concerned.

At least four levels could be considered in this complex media landscape where a kind of 'layered journalism' (Ward, 2009) is increasingly present:

- 1) Professional journalism performed as a full-time, paid, exclusive, specialized job in newsrooms in institutional media companies;
- 2) Professional journalism performed as a full-time, specialized job in new media (online) outlets, such as news sites and weblogs;
- 3) Journalism performed as an amateur part-time activity in individual or collective news sites and weblogs, as well as in institutional media companies;
- 4) Journalism performed as a 'citizenship practice', on an informal and casual basis, contributing to broaden and expand the sources of information used by old and new media (the 'crowdsourcing').

It should be notice that the first and the second levels are increasingly approaching, and even mixing, as is pointed by Glaser (2008):

'Mainstream media reporters have started blogging in droves, while larger blogs operations have hired seasoned reporters and focused on doing traditional journalism. (...) There are thousands of journalists who now blog, and there are lots of bloggers who are trained journalists'.

After a period of time when media mainstream organizations (and journalists themselves) regarded less formal news sites and blogs with some suspicion, things have been changing. Big traditional media now create their own blogs, blogs more committed with journalism are developing truly professional projects, and the blogosphere turned to be a valuable source of information in many cases. Not all blogs are involved in journalism (many of them explicitly say they don't want to), not all blogs follow technical or ethical standards that would allow them to be trustful (neither do some of mainstream media), but an increasing number can claim to perform journalism in a serious, accurate, reliable way.

An interesting point would be to discuss whether blogs turn to be more ‘journalistic’ insofar as they approach to the common standards and rules (and ethos) of mainstream media journalism, or whether they challenge some of those standards and rules, bringing new practices and new values (and a specific ethos?) to the job, thus broadening the traditional definition of journalism. This trend can be regarded in two ways. On one hand, there are bloggers who very closely commit themselves explicitly with the values, norms and standards traditionally associated to professional journalism: Dan Gillmor, for example, has created a ‘Citizen Journalist Pledge’ for the contributors of his blog ‘Bayosphere’, urging them to ‘agree to be accurate, complete, fair and transparent’ in their posts, and to ‘report and produce news explaining the facts as fairly, thoroughly, accurately and openly’ as they can (Gillmor, 2005)<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, it is clear that blogging has, in many situations, a rather different way of dealing with news and information, and it also has a rather different way of dealing with the ‘audience’, stimulating a continuous interaction between news producers and news consumers, up to a point where the simple difference between producers and consumers (mixed into ‘*producers*’) no longer makes sense. And this practice (which is more than just a practice, because it means a totally new way of understanding the media operation and media role in the society) is strongly challenging traditional media practice and ethos, forcing them to face their responsibilities in rather new terms.

Besides these more or less hybrid professional forms of journalism, other forms of gathering and disseminating news and information in the public space, although somehow atypical (that is to say: not performed as a profession or as a job), increasingly claim the right to be considered as ‘journalism activities’. The generalized use of portable computers and mobile phones, for example, made it very easy for someone accidentally found in the middle of an event to report about it (through text, sound or picture), either through a personal blog or through an open news site or even through mainstream media (who now stimulate this sort of contributions). Recent dramatic situations, such as the Katrina hurricane in the USA, the Far East tsunami or the turmoil in Iran during election times, just to mention a few, gave enormous evidence of how we can get more information and more varied points of view if we add all these contributions – with some inherent risks of misinformation and of lack of skills, of course – to the work performed by

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<sup>9</sup> Friend & Singer (2007: 127-133) give a series of examples of the same type: the ‘Bloggers’ Code of Ethics’, written by Jonathan Dube (see *Cyberjournalist.net*), the ethical guidelines proposed by Rebecca Blood in her ‘*The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog*’, the code of blogging ethics advanced by Martin Kuhn, the guidelines suggested by the well-known blogger and online journalist J. D. Lasica, the set of rules offered by the *Online Journalism Review*, etc.

mainstream media. And these new opportunities, matching some new positive will of citizen participation in the public sphere, are open to anybody in a way they have never been in the past:

I think it's a mistake to define journalism on the basis of who practices it. Some people may perform an act of journalism only once in their lifetime. Look, for instance, at someone who was caught in the tsunami and took a picture of what was going on. The journalist's role is changing. We now have more people doing journalism, which can be confusing; but there is a role for [professional] journalists, the role of editing, managing information, perhaps even educating people to help them to do better journalism. The idea that institutions own journalism is coming to an end, but journalism doesn't (Jarvis, 2008: 4).

The fact that anybody can (and probably should) *do journalism*, in the sense explained above, doesn't necessarily mean everybody *is a journalist*, in the sense of a profession. When someone engages professionally in journalism, this means more than just being able to 'respond journalistically' in a casual situation. More than being *reactive* to events that may occur here and there, journalists are supposed to be also *proactive* in the permanent search (and investigation) of meaningful, comprehensive, socially relevant information, even when it is 'hidden' behind the events or when it must be searched far from their neighbourhood. Being able to do this implies having the proper means; acquiring and permanently developing the adequate knowledge, know-how and specialized skills; assuming the social responsibility of this work in order to serve the public interest; accepting (and being accountable for) a clear commitment with the ethical values and norms attached to such an important and sensitive job in the contemporary societies.

Should there be any difference between these different levels of performing journalism, for example in terms of credential, license or some other sort of public instrument of recognition of the particular duties involved in it? Probably yes. But this doesn't mean that one condition is *superior* or *inferior* to the other, one more or less 'legitimate' than the other; it just means that the demands and expectations attached to one or the other are *different*, both in kind and in degree. These different forms of working with news and information are to be seen as complimentary, rather than as mutually exclusive. They can cooperate in the joint efforts to provide society with better information. To involve citizens (and to involve them actively) in the *co-production* of news and reporting is something all the mass-media should consider as a duty, not just a kind of 'good-will concession' or a simple way of sparing some money (because these citizen contributions are usually much less expensive than the assignment of all the tasks to a professional reporter)<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> The expansion of opportunities for citizens to perform some kind of journalistic work has a supplementary advantage that should be underlined: it certainly helps to expand and to deepen *media literacy*. The experience of producing news and of feeling directly all the benefits and constraints associated to it certainly helps people to better understand the logics underlying the media functioning, and, therefore, to develop a more critical way of consuming information.

If *journalism-as-a-citizen-activity* doesn't need (nor shouldn't) any kind of license, credential or prerequisites, the same doesn't necessarily apply, in the same terms, to *journalism-as-a-professional-work* – which doesn't exclude the 'citizen' condition, but goes beyond that. Although it may look sympathetic or popular for a journalist to claim to be no different from 'an average citizen', performing his/her job on the ground of just giving use to the universal *right to freedom of speech*, we know this is not the whole truth. In our societies, and in our media surrounding, journalists have special duties and responsibilities in order to adequately fulfil the *public's right to information*. They also have special rights (more or less expanded in legal terms), but these mustn't be regarded as elite privileges: they have been granted over time because they were considered as the necessary conditions for them to perform their tasks in the best possible way. When journalists insist they are not different from any other citizen, very often the assertion is invoked to refuse any particular professional responsibility and, subsequently, to escape any further obligation to be accountable for what they did (or did not). That's why in these cases any criticism against specific journalistic practices is often disregarded, under the accusation that it is menacing freedom of speech – as if freedom of speech were an absolute, irresponsible and unaccountable right, somehow exclusively kept and exercised by the journalists alone.

## 5. The central role of ethics

More specifically as far as journalism ethics is concerned, this strongly changing media landscape raises a number of controversies, doubts and challenges. For methodological purposes, they might be organized into two separate (although intertwined) groups, depending on whether we put more emphasis on the *media* or on the *actors*: (a) the new ethical questions allegedly brought to journalism since it began being performed online, in the so-called 'new media' and in a digital environment where Internet reigns; (b) the new ethical issues associated to the fact that, besides professional journalists, many new actors entered the field of public diffusion of news and information, claiming to practice some kind of journalism too.

### a) *New media – new ethics?*

Is the Web “simply a new *tool* for communicating, or is it a new *way of* communicating?” (Friend & Singer, 2007: 58, emphasis by the authors). Apparently, it is a new tool that makes communication easier, faster and more accessible to everyone, user or producer (or '*produser*'); but it is something more than that, given its particular characteristics and its potential for social change. Considering the fact that journalism in the new media is being developed with a new tool

but also in the context of a really ‘transforming technology’, this means, as Friend & Singer (*ibidem*) argue, that ‘older journalistic standards are still critically important’ here, but also that ‘several new ethical wrinkles’ must be recognized and dealt with.

According to Heinonen (2005) and his research among Finnish journalists, some ethical demands are usually regarded as *constant* or ‘perpetual’, whether the job is performed in traditional or in new media (truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, credibility); some other ethical values are also regarded as constant, but they are considered to be ‘highlighted in the online environment’ (Heinonen, 2005: 137): that would be the case of plagiarism and of the blurring borders between journalistic and non-journalistic contents, both made easier, more frequent and rather ‘normal’ by the new Internet context. Besides these, however, some *emerging* ethical issues can be identified specifically in online journalism: its ‘expanded time-span’ (*ibid.*: 138), by which online journalism is ‘theoretically eternal’ (and, therefore, search engines can keep bringing up old information from the archives, often without updates or the due corrections), a sort of ‘clash of cultures’ (institutional and ‘hierarchical’ journalism coexisting with citizens’ eagerness to freely participate in the information flow, but following different rules – see the problem of anonymity), and, more generally, the questions related to journalists’ relationship with their audience, in a context where interactivity and partnership are favoured both by the technology and by the new social demands. The new media seem, actually, to be ‘a catalyst for ethical considerations’, as Heinonen (2005: 140) argues. And he adds, in the sequence of his empirical findings:

“[A]lthough the new media do not seem to constitute a revolution in journalism ethics, the data suggests that in the online world proper journalistic conduct may have to change to be compatible with both the requirements and the possibilities of the new medium. As institutional journalism everywhere is increasingly influenced by the global netizen culture, journalistic ethics may encounter issues to which the prevailing codes of conduct provide no or little guidance (Heinonen, 2005: 141).

The new tools available to journalism online raise specific problems with ethical implications – one of the most often discussed being that of *immediacy*. More than ever, news go public just a second after the events occurred (or after some information was found by a journalist), because ‘that’s the way it is’ in the online platforms and because fierce competition among all kind of media outlets forces it to be so. ‘Make it fast and short’ seems to be more and more the prevailing rule in this media landscape. The idea that information should go public only after a careful process of verification<sup>11</sup> – which includes the confirmation by at least two different

<sup>11</sup> Verification, as is argued by Kovach & Rosenstiel in *The Elements of Journalism*, is ‘the essence of journalism’. According to their own words, ‘the discipline of verification is what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction, or art’ (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001: 71), but ‘the modern press culture generally is weakening’ this methodology, partly because of the new technologies (*ibid.*: 75).

sources ('double-checking') and the consultation of the different parties somehow involved in it – is nowadays under constant menace. The possibility of updating and correcting the information along a permanent flow during the 24 hours of the day (a major change against the 'periodicity' that was so typical for traditional journalism) tempts everyone to 'publish now and confirm later' or, as the defenders of the so-called '*incremental journalism*' pledge, to come to the real story through a series of approximate steps by which the 'truth' will eventually be totally unveiled. This increasing practice may put journalism credibility at risk and raises important ethical doubts, since a rumour or a partial, unverified information can be published exactly in the same terms of a confirmed story. But, according to some opinions, this is just the new way of dealing with the new technological tools, namely Internet, where the bare discovery of the 'truth' is a process of 'collaborative work', made of many different contributions: the information initially published online by a journalist doesn't need to be finished, since it will allegedly be continued, developed, added, confirmed, nuanced, in the minutes or hours to come, with the participation of other journalists, of bloggers, of members of the vast Internet audience.

This new ethical perspective emerges from the consideration of the Web both as a *new tool* and as a *new way* of communicating. Actually, it is defended by most people who presently share with the journalists the public flow of news and information – namely the bloggers –, either participating through comments in the work of the mainstream media or developing alternative informative projects (professional in some cases, amateur in many others). And bloggers, Friend & Singer (2007) argue, don't necessarily share the ideas of traditional journalism regarding the seek for the truth, and particularly the need for a previous, exhaustive process of verification:

[Bloggers] do not see truth as resting on the decisions of one individual or group of individuals within a news organization or anywhere else. Nor do they see truth as having to do with attempts at objectivity. Instead, bloggers see truth as emerging from shared, collective knowledge – from an electronically enabled marketplace of ideas. (...) Knowledge is seen as evolving through connections rather than as contained within one entity such as a newspaper or newscast. (...) Truth for the blogger is created collectively rather than hierarchically. Information is not vetted before its dissemination, but instead through the process of disseminating multiple views, with truth, in the bloggers' view, as the end result of the discussion" (Friend & Singer, 2007: 121).

And this leads to our second point.

### ***b) Different actors – different ethics?***

Apart from (but together with) the fact that the new media, given their characteristics, may challenge some traditional ethical norms in journalism, we live, nowadays, in a media surrounding where many actors entered the public sphere and finished the old monopoly of journalists in the process of gathering, editing and diffusing news and information. And the



obvious questions are: do they all do the same things?, do they have the same rights and duties?, do they share the same ethics?

It may be useful to make some distinction between three different forms of public participation and publication in the Internet: (1) ‘*user generated content*’ (USG) doesn’t have necessarily to do with journalistic information, but with the universal right to freedom of expression and with the duty of the media system to be, among other things, an open forum for public discussion, giving voice to everyone (and particularly to those who usually didn’t have a voice); (2) ‘*participatory journalism*’ relates to a kind of collaborative work, where ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ (Rosen, 2004) involve themselves, together with the structures of media organizations, in the process of searching, gathering and handling news and information in the public interest, but always under some kind of supervision by professional journalists or editors; (3) ‘*citizen journalism*’ (in this or other similar expression) refers to an autonomous activity of public diffusion of news and information through instruments of self-edition (news sites, blogs, etc.) independent from the traditional media industry, carried out by ‘lay people’ on a more amateur or more professional basis (but, here, apart from the established organizations of professional journalists), with a purpose of civic participation – and often of a sort of ‘counterpoint’ to the mainstream, institutional journalism.

Some specific ethical issues concern more clearly the last group (since, in the case of the others, there is usually some kind of filter that makes journalists ultimately responsible for the publication), but others relate to all the situations: let’s think, for example, in the widespread trend to *anonymity* in the online environment, with serious consequences in terms of *credibility* – and of lack of *accountability*.

Besides the different ways of dealing with the ethical demands of *truthfulness* (because of a particular understanding of the ways to come to the truth) and of *verification* (because of the increasing pressure for immediate publication), as was explained in the previous point, the coexistence of various types of actors in the field of public diffusion of news and information – call it journalism or call it another thing – has been raising controversies particularly about two basic ethical principles: *independence* and *objectivity*. More than these two key-concepts usually associated to journalism professional ethics, bloggers and other practitioners of alternative media tend to stress another one above them (or even instead of them): *transparency*.

The claim for transparency as an ethical fundamental demand of serious journalistic work is not a new one, and shouldn’t necessarily be linked to the emergence of alternative voices in the media space. Kovach & Rosenstiel (2001) in their important reflections about the basic elements of journalism, ask the journalists to be ‘as transparent as possible’ about their ‘reporting methods

and motives’, and even consider transparency ‘the most important single element in creating a better discipline of verification’ (Kovach & Rosenstiel (2001: 80) – and let’s remember that, for those authors, ‘the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification’ (*ibid.*: 71). However, we can say that never before the emergence of alternative online media was the need for transparency so emphasized: the well-known blogger Jeff Jarvis even refers to transparency as “the open-source era’s highest ethic” (*apud* Friend & Singer, 2007: 71). Other known blogger, J. D. Lasica, says transparency is the “golden rule of the blogosphere” (*apud* Friend & Singer, 2007: 123), and Friend & Singer (2007: 70) suggest that this ‘may be the only journalistic ethic that has moved from online to traditional newsrooms instead of the other way round’

But this claim for transparency in reporting goes beyond the disclosure of what may have happened ‘behind the scene’ during the journalistic process, allowing the audience to have a better information about all the questions involved (and to check it by themselves, if they wish to). It also suggests that, instead of following the traditional posture of objectivity, it is better for a reporter to use a more personal voice, assuming his/her beliefs and opinions, and not fearing to be partial and biased in his/her work – as far as he/she previously tells the audience, in a transparent way, what his/her interests are, what points of view, what motives. In this sense, *transparency* could ultimately be regarded as a replacement for *objectivity* as an ethical value or norm, as many bloggers tend to defend. And, in fact, most of them (as well as all those involved in alternative media) disregard any division between ‘fact-based’ reporting and ‘value-driven’ commentary, clearly rejecting traditional objectivity:

Practitioners of alternative media have both recognised the moral and political nature of objectivity and have directed their work to challenging its central assumptions: that it is possible in the first place to separate facts from values and that it is morally and politically preferable to do so. Such challenges are not the sole province of alternative journalists, neither are they new. (...) Workers within alternative media, however, seek to challenge objectivity and impartiality from both an ethical and a political standpoint in their own journalistic practices (Atton, 2005: 19).

Although not all bloggers assume the partisan character typical for the so-called alternative media, the fact is that many of them pretend to practice a kind of alternative journalism – which means a different practice, but also, very often, the critique of mainstream journalism practices and values (being ‘watchdogs of the watchdog’ is actually one of their relevant roles in our time).

In spite of all this, it should be said that the urge for more transparency in journalism (in all its forms) doesn’t necessarily mean that all journalism would better be partisan and that some effort of objectivity should be regarded as impossible or undesirable. The concept of objectivity has been discussed for decades and there is some consensus that it is often misunderstood (or

perverted in its background and its purpose). Those who stand against it insist that pure objectivity is impossible and that any account of the reality is always a personal construction to some degree – therefore, journalists had better assume their subjectivity with transparency and without illusions. Those who insist in its potential value argue that objectivity never meant to deny the journalists' subjectivity but, on the contrary, to be well conscious of it, on order to be cautious when reporting, trying to do it with as much detachment as possible: it was about method, not about the person. When the concept began to appear associated to journalism, in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'objectivity called for journalists to develop a consistent *method* of testing information – a transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work' (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001: 72. emphasis added). In this sense, it can be an important tool in order to accomplish the previously referred 'discipline of verification' that is 'the essence of journalism' (*ibidem*).

It's probably because of this controversy that some authors have been trying to 'redeem' objectivity and to put into a new perspective, no longer associated to naturalistic visions of the surrounding reality, but understood in the light of the contemporary expectations towards journalism – towards an interpretative, meaningful approach of the social events and processes. That's the case of Stephen Ward and his proposal of a '*pragmatic objectivity*' applied to journalism, insisting that an objective attitude doesn't mean an unconditional belief in 'the facts' and just 'the facts':

Unlike traditional objectivity, pragmatic objectivity does not require detachment from all values and perspectives – an impossible demand on humans. Instead, it tests the essential activities of interpreting, evaluating and adopting a perspective (Ward, 1999: 5)

In this sense, Ward suggests that 'an interpretation is objective if it is well justified according to the best available standards', divided into three types: 'empirical standards', 'standards of coherence' and 'standards of rational debate' (*ibid.*: 6). That's why a report can be (or not) objective, even if it goes beyond the sheer account of facts and engages in (always somewhat value-driven) interpretation:

A new theory of objectivity is needed because journalism is moving away from a rigid, traditional style of objective reporting that eliminates any judgment or hint of editorializing. More and more, reporters use a lively, opinionated style, or adopt an interpretive stance toward stories. (...) Journalists increasingly see themselves as providing meaning to the daily barrage of fragmented news items. But giving meaning to an event is not a simple, uncontroversial procedure. The meaning may be biased or ideological. Journalists need a theory of objective interpretation to guide their forays into interpretive journalism (Ward, 1999: 11).

In this context we could also evoke Donald Matheson's assertion that 'the journalist's interpretative role [is] the basis of good journalism' (Matheson, 2005: 112) and this is 'something of an ethical imperative' (*ibid.*: 113).

Concluding, we'd say that a deeper and more updated understanding of what objectivity in journalism may be good for is, in our opinion, more stimulating than just its bare dismissal as an old illusion, an unattainable ideal or a disguised way of actually manipulating information.

## 6. Personal and institutional responsibilities

In global terms, then, the main question to be asked is whether the same ethical principles and norms apply, and apply in rather similar terms and degree, both to journalists and to non-journalists:

"Are the ethics of communication universal or do the ethical choices involved in publishing information, ideas, or opinions vary depending on whether a person is a professional journalist or an amateur one? Do different principles take precedence? Do blogs raise issues for their creators that traditional journalists typically do not encounter, or are ethical challenges merely matter of degree?" (Friend & Singer, 2007: 116).

It seems clear that many bloggers share many of the same ethical concerns as professional journalists do, as we have seen in the examples shown in point 4 of this paper. It also seems clear that a rather different emphasis is put by them in some ethical demands that often are somehow 'forgotten' or insufficiently considered by journalists and newsrooms from mainstream media – such as transparency. Finally, an open discussion remains about the need to revise some ethical norms associated to traditional journalism but allegedly less adequate to the new environment of Internet and of online publication, where most media (both mainstream and alternative) increasingly work – such as the clear separation between editorial and commercial content, or the previous verification of all information before publication, in a context of pressure for immediacy and of an information flow running 24 hours / 7 days. In this last case, however, the question challenges both the amateur and the professional journalists.

Although the big ethical values and principles of public communication are always the same (seek the truth, be accurate, honest and fair, minimize harm, be accountable), the specific ways of making them efficient and collectively shared in practical terms may vary according to the time and to particular social and cultural contexts. As it happens with most professional organizations, that usually develop a set of specific deontological norms organized into a 'code of ethics' or 'code of conduct' (and from time to time revise that code), also in this particular case one should remember that 'the ethics of journalism (...) is grounded in time, place, and technology' (Friend & Singer, 2007: xxv). And the digital media environment certainly is an

opportunity for a deep reflexion about the better concrete ways of meeting the large ethical demands associated to fair and trustworthy communication, both in professional journalism and in the various forms of publication of news and information.

Yet, another problem deserves some attention: should ethics be regarded as an ‘almost wholly personal’ issue, as bloggers often tend to do, or should we consider another level, the one of professional journalism, where ethics are “both personal and social” (Friend & Singer, 2007: 121)? Even when no substantial differences between journalistic practices by professionals or by amateurs can be pointed on an *individual* level, the same is not necessarily true on a *collective* level – on the level of the *professional group*, or rather on the level of *journalism as a profession*<sup>12</sup>.

Recalling the concept of professionalism (Evetts, 2005; 2006) – understood in terms of ‘occupational professionalism’ (a specific system of values and of social responsibilities attached to a specific profession), and not just as a common-sense attitude of always doing the right thing at work –, Freidson (2004) argues that ethics is its very ‘soul’, and a decisive stance to explain the difference between *professionals* and just well-paid *technical experts*.

As Freidson explains, professional ethics is mainly about assuring that the good intentions of rendering a good and trustworthy service in the public interest, with competence, independence and altruism, ‘are translated into action in the various professions’ (Freidson, 2004: 214). But professional ethics itself must be regarded, still according to Freidson (*ibidem*), at two different levels: the individual level of ‘*practice ethics*’ and the collective level of ‘*institutional ethics*’. This distinction helps us to understand that even in journalism (a craft which, unlike many other professions, is being increasingly practiced by ‘laypersons’ and on a non-professional basis) there is an ethical responsibility that can’t be reduced to the individual level of one’s consciousness. And since journalism plays a relevant social role, because it deals with fundamental rights of citizenship in a democratic society (the right to information and the right to free speech), then it should not disregard its efforts in order to be practiced *also* on a *professional* level – and with *professionalism*.

‘*Practice ethics*’ are only a part of professional ethics; they ‘deal with the problems of work that are faced by individual practitioners, addressing ethical issues familiar to everyone but which have assumed exotic guises that need sorting out and recognizing’ (Freidson, 2004: 216). Besides these, Freidson points also to the ‘*institutional ethics*’. What is their particular role? They

<sup>12</sup> ‘Many journalists now regard themselves not merely as ‘being professional’ but as being a member of a profession’, say Aldridge & Evetts (2003: 560) in a comment to the more recent efforts of journalists to approach to the structures (and not only to the discourse) of professionalism, such as journalism university degrees, thus trying to achieve higher social respectability.

more broadly ‘deal with the economic, political, social, and ideological circumstances which *create* many of the moral problems of work’ (*ibidem*, emphasis by the author). In this sense, they are ‘animated by moral concern for the ultimate purpose’ of professions (*ibidem*), and, so, demand that the professional groups somehow take the responsibility for it at an institutional level too:

The proponents of professionalism must necessarily exercise a strong, principled voice both in broad policy-making forums and in the communities where practice takes place. This voice cannot be left to individuals, however, for the most influential source of evaluation and protest comes from a collegial body which provides authoritative support to individuals and expresses forcefully the collective opinion of the discipline (Freidson, 2004: 217).

This perspective on professional ethics underlines the *collective* responsibility of a profession<sup>13</sup> in order to gain and maintain its social credibility, as well as the trust of the public it aims to serve. In the case of journalism, and of the different levels of its practice, it may not be an important issue to those who ‘*do journalism*’ on a casual, informal basis (and to whom the ‘practice ethics’ would be enough), but it surely is important for the professional journalists, who, regarded as a professional group, are expected to defend and preserve the ultimate purposes of the discipline. And these purposes are grounded on ethics (also understood at an institutional level), which constitute, according to Freidson, the very ‘soul of professionalism’:

The functional value of a body of specialized knowledge and skill is less central to the professional ideology than its attachment to a transcendent value that gives it meaning and justifies its independence. By virtue of that independence members of the profession claim the right to judge the demands of employers or patrons and the laws of the state, and to criticize or refuse to obey them. That refusal is based not on personal grounds of individual conscience or desire but on the *professional* grounds that the basic value or purpose of a discipline is being perverted (Freidson, 220-221, emphasis by the author).

That’s why, following this perspective, professionals should claim ‘the moral as well as the technical right to control the uses of their discipline’ (Freidson, 2004: 222), but with one major difference: while they ‘should have no right to be the proprietors of the knowledge and technique’ of that discipline, they ‘are obliged to be [its] moral custodians’ (*ibidem*). And this implies, along with the public defense of the necessary conditions for an independent and competent work, also the surveillance and (self-regulated) control of the good ethical practices inside the professional group itself: ‘If professionalism is to be reasserted and regain some of its influence, it must not only elaborate and refine its codes of ethics but also strengthen its methods of adjudicating and correcting their violation’ (*ibid.*: 216).

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<sup>13</sup> Evans (2008) also stresses ‘commonality’ as a ‘key element’ of professionalism: ‘Though I accept that in everyday parlance it is acceptable to talk of an individual’s professionalism, the majority of definitions (...) suggest a general conception of professionalism, like professional culture, as a collective notion: as a plurality, shared by many’ (Evans, 2008: n/p). And not only shared by many, we would add, but also somehow organized and committed at an institutional level.

## 7. Conclusions

Trying to sum up, we would point to these main conclusions:

(1) The fact that journalism (and, more broadly, various hybrid forms of public communication) is increasingly performed with the **new technological tools** of the online environment challenges some journalism concepts, practices, standards and ethical norms, opening the need for a debate that, more than ever, must go beyond the traditional borders of the profession and involve ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ (Rosen, 2006). It’s not about doing the same old things with a new tool, but about doing new things in rather new ways. The *threat* commonly associated to a totally new environment should turn to an *opportunity* to improve journalism and to redefine it according to new circumstances, new partners, and new social demands.

(2) Additionally, the fact that many **new actors** entered the field of diffusion of news and information in the public space (a field previously closed to professional journalists organized in media companies), either co-operating with professional journalists or running their own operations on an autonomous basis, raises new questions as far as ethics are concerned. The ethics of professionals and of bloggers or other online publishers of news and information may not be entirely interchangeable<sup>14</sup>, but they seem to be more complementary than contradictory, as is argued by Friend & Singer (2007: 133): ‘The relationship between bloggers and journalists perhaps can best be described as symbiotic’. If the trend is (and we believe it is, and for good reasons) towards a more complex media landscape where different kinds of journalistic activity coexist – remember the suggestion made by Ward (2009b) of a ‘layered journalism’, the one that ‘combines professional and citizen journalism through the creative use of new media’ –, it seems important that all of them gain credibility and trust, doing their share in terms of serving the public interest. And all these “layers” can learn from one another – particularly in what concerns the development or renewal of ethical norms more adequate to our new environment – even without losing their specific characteristics, purpose and identity.

<sup>14</sup> Ward (2009b) advances the concept of “ecumenical ethics”, which he explains in these terms: “All communicators abide by general ethical rules such as to tell the truth. But when we come to different forms of communication, we find different values and norms. News reporting will value accuracy and impartiality. But online blogging or citizen journalism will value immediacy, transparency, and strong opinion. The ethics of the future will not be one set of rules for all but a ‘mixed ethics’ of different forms of journalism. Perhaps ecumenical ethics has always existed. The political cartoonist or the editorial columnist of a print newspaper is not bound by the same rules of fairness and impartiality that restrain reporters. True, but today such differences go deeper. People advocate different norms within reporting – depending on whether the journalist is a Professional reporter or citizen journalist. I do not know whether layered ethics is the best way forward. But it is worth exploring”.

(3) Journalists always faced some problems and ambiguities in the process of defining, shaping and legitimizing their profession. The decisions about who should be included and who should be excluded from the professional group were difficult because of the characteristics of their activity (frequently balancing between the right to freedom of speech and the right to information), which contributed to an increasing blurring of the borders of their professional territory. With the development of online publication and with the multiplication of mechanisms of self-edition which make it very easy for anyone to produce and disseminate timely information in the public sphere, the idea of *journalism-as-a-citizen-practice* has been emphasized, somehow challenging the specialized field of *journalism-as-a-professional-work* – or the bare definition of who is a journalist. If everyone dealing with journalism in any form is expected to know and respect the ‘**practice ethics**’ of the activity, only the organized profession can (and is supposed to) be committed with an ‘**institutional ethics**’ that engages in guaranteeing the political, social, economical and cultural conditions necessary for journalism to fulfil its valuable role in a democratic society. In return, the profession must accept to be responsible and accountable for its work, developing the means of transparency and self-control which may give concrete substance to their alleged dedication to the public interest.

(4) The debate of the ethical issues is central to the debate of **journalism** itself, both in descriptive and in normative approaches (what it was, what it is, what it is becoming, what it should be), if we want to grasp and stress **its distinctive character** among the various forms of public communication surrounding us nowadays<sup>15</sup>. We live in a world ‘in which anyone can be a publisher, but not necessarily a journalist’ (Friend & Singer, 2007: xxiii), and, therefore, ‘a clear conception of the distinct nature and overriding social value of journalism in a digital democracy’ needs to be developed (Ward, 2008). Following Singer (2007; 2006), we also believe that the distinction between journalism and other forms of publication ‘rests primarily on ethics’, rather than on professional categories, labour status or technical skills. But ethics is not just the ability to respond in a correct way when we intend to ‘do journalism’ on a casual basis. Journalism at large has an ethical commitment that comes from its social responsibility in order to provide society with a comprehensive, attentive and meaningful account of the events and processes that

<sup>15</sup> This doesn’t mean to disregard or to disqualify other forms of communication, particularly in a time when “journalism no longer dominates the mediascape as *the* source for helping a society learn about itself”, as is said by Berkowitz (2009: 290, emphasis by the author), who adds: “Instead, journalism has become part of a holistic mix of media elements that intentionally or unintentionally provide people with varied glimpses of the world around them” (*ibidem*). It just means it is useful to know what to expect from different forms of communication, in order to be able to make them accountable in due terms.



help us to live our lives in community and to participate as citizens in the public affairs (in the ‘*res publica*’). Ethics relates to the way a journalist is supposed to make news and reporting (verification, interpretation, investigation, background), but it relates also to what happens *before* (the active search for relevant news in the public interest, the decision to write or not to write about this or that, the process of selecting issues and treating them according to some reliable hierarchy) and to what happens *after* that process (the consequences to people involved, the possible harm caused, the need for some follow-up). Dealing with these questions calls, after all, for a deep consciousness of every factor involved, but also for a complex knowledge and know-how that go far beyond a couple of technical skills. And all this is about ethics. That’s why professional journalism, in our view, still has a specific role in modern digital societies and calls for deep, demanding education and training – although it will more and more coexist with various other forms of journalistic practices that complement (rather than replace or exclude) it.

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